

# There's **something** about Franke

FRANKE JAMES IS USING HER CREATIVITY TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE—ARMED WITH A PAINTBRUSH AND A VIVID IMAGINATION—AND HAVING DAZZLING RESULTS.

By Astrid Van Den Broek

**A**m I going to end up as a character in one of her essays? This suddenly occurs to me as I tap on Franke James' silver front door knocker. Not so inconceivable, I think, in meeting this Toronto environmental artist and activist. After all, when *Freakonomics* author Steven Levitt offhandedly told James at a cocktail party that global warming might be good for Canada, that throwaway comment became the crux of one of her striking visual essays, *A Green Winter*. An evening spent listening to philosopher Mark Kingwell and writer Malcolm Gladwell led to *The Real Poop on Social Change* essay. Would it be too improbable to think that I, a writer here to chronicle James' transformation into a kind of everyday activist, might factor into her work?

James' voice comes through so strongly in her eclectic, captivating online visual essays that sometimes I feel like I've been reading her diary entries, instead of public documents. But that's exactly why they stand out. While so much environmental messaging is filled with admirable but often abstract concepts or clichéd language that fails to connect with its audience, James manages to avoid both. Instead, she offers her atypical journey toward a greener life in these can't-click-away illustration-meets-photography-meets-storytelling essays.

Once housed only online, five of them have been bound into the book *Bothered by My Green Conscience* (New Society Publishers, 2009). Now, whether it's sharing her tenacious tangle with the City of Toronto to build a green driveway (*Paradise Unpaved*), how she can't let go of the fact that her publisher forgot to print the inside cover page of her book red (*No One Will Know, Except You*) or how she blindly agreed to make dinner for complete strangers in responding to a captivating e-mail (*Dinner With a Stranger*), James provides proof that she's an artist with a clear vision to be the change she wishes to see, as Ghandi espoused.

But then, sharing that change with the world in this unusual way, she's also rousing others with her "Hey, you-can-do-it-too" environmental message.

## LISTEN TO YOUR GREEN CONSCIENCE

While James has always done things her own way, she certainly isn't the granola-crunching, tree-hugging whack job her brother-in-law Larry accuses her of being in the essay *My SUV and Me Say Goodbye*. As an artist, James spent 20 years focusing her talents on art and her creative services company, The James Gang, which she co-founded with husband Bill James. But four years ago, she began building essays out of her growing distress for the environment. "I got really concerned and people told me I was worrying about nothing, just don't worry about it and why was I focused on this?" she says. "And I just wanted to tell people about this issue." And while I anticipated that issue to be passionately told, I'm greeted at her stylish door by an equally stylish, petite woman, who turns out to be more soft-spoken and polite than fist-pounding in her actions. Yet, she's clearly resolute and impassioned about climate change.

Her angst began after a home energy audit she and Bill had done on their house. The pair had moved into their former commercial property in 2003 with an eye on renovating. In 2005, the house was audited—disastrously. "We got the worst score possible. I don't know if it was the worst, but it was really, really bad," says James while sitting in her dining room, where her early pieces dot the dark red walls. While that audit led them to make changes to the house such as installing triple-pane windows, it also set off a personal journey for James. "We were renovating and that got me thinking about energy efficiency," she says. "And all of the sudden I thought: 'What?' This is a huge issue and people are not paying attention. Climate change is the issue that



### QUICK FACT

With the help of a hydrologist, James calculated that her eco-friendly driveway reduces stormwater run-off by 10,135 gallons (38,365 litres).





will shape the 21st century. And it's both a crisis and an opportunity."

James took to the Internet and started writing climate change-themed essays—extended blog posts really, in which she showcased the ideas of some of the world's foremost thinkers on sustainability such as *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman and *Green Quotient* author Charles Lockwood. "The reaction to these written essays was zilch," she says. "For all the months and months of work I did, I didn't feel that I was getting through." So James, a University of Victoria class of '81 master of fine arts graduate, turned to mixing her illustrations, photography and the

written word to make the information accessible and entertaining. A Green Winter came first, establishing the template for James' future visual essays, which are a subtle mix of environment-related observations combined with personal events told in a critical yet self-deprecating tone. In the spectrum of existing environmental communications—ranging from environmental shock docs to it's-easy-being-green, how-to manuals for sustainable living—James has started her own medium. She layers relatable, simple prose over quirky images such as the black and white spotted "social leper" (pictured) that

appears in *The Real Poop on Social Change* or *Alice in Wonderland*, who ruminates over why Toronto didn't approve the green driveway project in *Paradise Unpaved*.

And while some, such as *A Green Winter*, are inspired by random meetings, other essays tell the story of the environmental changes James has made over the past four years. My SUV and Me details her and Bill's decision two years ago to sell their SUV and live car-free. *Paradise Unpaved* is an account of creating a green driveway and her battle with bureaucracy to do it. "I'd never seen anything like these essays applied to environmental advocacy and it affected me intellectually and emotionally," says Alex Mayer, director of the Michigan Tech Center for Water and Society, who helped check James' water runoff calculations for *Paradise Unpaved*. "Words can sometimes do that but they can also, especially when you're discussing environmental issues, seem rather dry."

Mayer's experience is echoed by Stan Kozak, curriculum specialist for Learning for a Sustainable Future, who recently witnessed James' tour de force at a workshop on climate change education. "We'd spent two days looking at the science and it was not looking good. Then, bango, Franke James comes along and says 'do the hardest thing first' and then shows that she has done it and is still living to prove it—and she is artistically thriving and maybe even seeing some financial benefits as well," says Kozak. "I think Franke should be the 'closer' at more conferences just to keep people's spirits up—and let them know there is hope if people take personal responsibility."

#### ALWAYS DO THE HARDEST THING FIRST

Any profile on James would be remiss if it didn't tell the story of her driveway. It begins with James on a simple mission to break up her enormous 34-foot-wide interlocking brick driveway and replace it with Japanese blood grass, dogwood and a stone path to her front door. Instead of being green lighted by the city, James' idea was rejected. "Eco-friendly driveway is rejected by the city," read the *Toronto Star* headline. Her ensuing battle with officials is chronicled in *Paradise Unpaved*, where James argued that interlock would only cause stormwater runoff into the sewers, contradicting Toronto's mission to be a green city. Franke politely stuck to her guns and made the change. "She certainly ruffled some feathers, but it was all done in a very professional and polite way," says Tony Munoz, a Toronto-based James Gang client. In the end, James herself isn't sure how she got Toronto's first green driveway permit, wondering if it was the media attention, or the fact that, as she writes in *Paradise*, she "picked up the phone and spoke to a nice lady in the mayor's office who agreed that Toronto the Green should let us build an eco-friendly driveway—and the city would be pleased—because they never thought people would rip up their driveways to help the environment!"

That polite-but-persistent approach to change is not Franke-come-lately behaviour. Growing up as one of seven children, James attended the Ursuline School, a private girls' convent school in Toronto. "It was a very disciplined school, yet very creative," she says. "For example, the teachers would set an assignment and I would come up afterwards and say 'I was wondering if I could do it this way, just a little bit different from what you had in mind.' Nine times out of ten they'd say yes." Later at SEED Alternative School, she selected her own courses, which led to unique teaching opportunities such as convincing Ontario artist Larry Bracegirdle, whom she met at an outdoor art exhibit, to teach her photorealism painting as a course. "Like the driveway story, that's very characteristic of her," says husband Bill. "She thought the driveway should be a certain way because of her environmental concerns. And many people said 'Don't talk to city hall. Just do it.' But Franke,



#### SOCIAL CHANGE

James asks, Can social pressure bring about real and lasting environmental change?

she's not one to follow rules but she's not one to break them either. She thought it was a dumb rule and she told them to change it."

James' why not?-type of thinking permeates her work, and she continues to encourage readers to nurture their inner "Alice" [in Wonderland] thinking to challenge authority—and to tackle the hardest thing first, which in James' case was getting rid of her beloved silver 1999 Toyota 4Runner SUV. The decision was partly environmentally motivated, part practicality—her two children, David and Bronwyn, 26 and 21 years respectively, had long moved out of the house and therefore didn't need shuttling around. For James, this was also her first environmental sacrificial act, one which laid the foundation for her further feats of activism.

And for now, when she's not working on James Gang projects, she continues to spread her message of little changes leading to big payoffs by giving her presentation "Six Tools to Make Climate Change Art," another project about expressing climate change concerns creatively. 350.org, the organization behind this fall's International Day of Climate Action on October 24, has come calling, eager to share Six Tools with all its members. And she's currently mulling over another two essays, which she thinks through on her daily 5-mile walks and then later storyboards in a yel-

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low notebook. While she won't divulge exactly what the essays are about, it's likely one of them—which can take one to two months to produce—will feature her reactions to a recent talk given by James Lovelock, a British scientist who *Rolling Stone* magazine dubbed "The Prophet of Climate Change." Like all of her visual essays, it will tie into something that has happened in her own life, designed to inspire readers to figure out their own steps to conquer climate change. "I don't want to make others feel guilty for not giving up their cars—everybody should choose their own way to go green," says James.

James recently finished reading *Getting Green Done* by Auden Schendler, in which he works up a concept about using your "biggest hammer" to tackle climate change, a tone that rings similarly to her own mantra: Do the hardest thing first. "And that's how I see it," James says. "My biggest hammer is creating climate change art." 🐦